

BROOKINGS

RESEARCH

Why should America negotiate with China?

There is no credible way for the United States to seal itself off from the effects of China's actions.

Ryan Hass

June 4, 2025

Editor's note: This article was developed in part through the author's participation in a project organized by the Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies. The views in this piece are the author's alone.

Executive summary

Members of the policy communities in Washington and Beijing are increasingly reaching a common conclusion on the diminishing value of U.S.-China negotiations. President Donald Trump is an important outlier from this emerging consensus. His views will carry the day in setting American policy. Thus, the central question facing American policymakers is not whether to engage in negotiations, but rather how to deliver better results from negotiations than previous administrations. To support such planning, this paper examines the purposes of direct negotiations. It then reviews the negotiating records of the three previous U.S. administrations to draw lessons from those periods for the way forward. From there, the paper focuses on three issues that could serve as the basis of future negotiations and a strategy for organizing the process. The three issues are trade and economics, military and risk reduction, and law enforcement cooperation. A path remains open for Trump and Xi Jinping to drive

the relationship forward, but only if they take control of the moment rather than succumb to fatalism about the inevitability of estrangement or conflict.

Framing the moment

While there are vanishingly few areas of agreement between the United States and China, there is one broadly shared sentiment between policymakers in both countries: cynicism. As the costs and consequences of the trade war become more visible, the national mood in both countries about the U.S.-China relationship is hardening. Leaders and leading thinkers seem to be becoming more fatalistic about the trajectory of relations. And there appears to be growing pessimism that problems in the relationship are fixable.

In Washington, there is a widespread view that direct negotiations with Chinese officials are a [waste of time and effort \(https://www.brookings.edu/events/how-will-congress-approach-u-s-china-relations-a-conversation-with-chairman-moolenaar-and-ranking-member-krishnamoorthi/\)](https://www.brookings.edu/events/how-will-congress-approach-u-s-china-relations-a-conversation-with-chairman-moolenaar-and-ranking-member-krishnamoorthi/). According to this logic, previous administrations tried and failed to solve problems with Chinese counterparts through direct negotiations. Critics of negotiations with the Chinese believe such efforts oftentimes did not deliver on their objectives, such as in America's decades-long and unsatisfying efforts to improve human rights conditions in China or gain greater market access and fair treatment for American firms in the Chinese market. This argument maintains that even when negotiations produced breakthroughs, China failed to abide by them. Analysts often point to President Xi Jinping's [public pledge](#) at the White House during his 2015 state visit that China would refrain from militarizing its outposts in the South China Sea as an example of a broken promise.

As I wrote for [Time magazine](#) in April, Trump administration officials also are colored by their experiences negotiating the U.S.-China Phase One trade deal in 2020. Under the deal, Beijing agreed to increase its purchases of U.S. goods and services by at least \$200 billion above 2017 levels. The deal ultimately did not deliver. Beijing failed to meet its purchasing pledges.

Trump administration officials also are dismissive of attempts by the Obama and Biden administrations to address U.S.-China tensions through dialogue. They argue that former national security advisors such as Susan Rice and Jake Sullivan went to great

lengths to meet their Chinese counterparts and had little in terms of substantive results to show for it. Not only did such outreach fail to deliver results, Trump administration officials contend, but it also presented the United States as an ardent suitor chasing after China, rather than a powerful country that knows how to exercise leverage.

Chinese officials also have taken to publicly challenging the value of negotiating with the United States. In a polished propaganda video released on April 29 titled "[Never Kneel Down](#)," a Chinese narrator intoned to a global audience, "China won't back down so the voices of the weak will be heard." The narrator later assured, "[American] Bullying will be stopped ... When the rest of the world stands together in solidarity, the US is just a small, stranded boat." In short, Beijing appears to be approaching the Trump administration as a long-term [strategic challenge](#) to be managed, rather than a crisis that is resolvable through negotiations.

All things being equal, Beijing would prefer for Washington to reduce pressure on China's economic growth and expansion in influence in Asia and globally. China would like a truce on the current trade war, as well as relief from restrictions on two-way investment and controls on high-technology exports to China. When Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent [proposed](#) to Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng in Geneva this May to reciprocally lower tariffs and effectively call a 90-day truce in the trade war, Beijing accepted. Beijing is dubious about the durability of any agreements that it reaches with the Trump administration, though.

As widespread as such cynicism about the value of negotiations has become in both countries, it has not yet infected the man in Washington who matters most. President Donald Trump remains steadfast in his conviction that he will succeed in negotiating a new deal with Xi that will unlock benefits for American workers. Trump seems to remain convinced a U.S.-China deal is attainable that would support his vision for strengthening America's sovereignty, reindustrializing its economy, and lowering the risk of great power conflict. Given Trump's conviction that he can negotiate favorable deals with Xi, the operative question for the American policy community is not whether negotiations with China are useful, but rather how such negotiations could be scoped and done differently from the past to produce better results.

The purpose of diplomatic negotiations with China

There is no credible way for the United States to seal itself off from the effects of China's actions. If China surges exports to pick up the slack in domestic demand, the effects are felt on American factory floors. If China intensifies military pressure on America's partners in Asia, the global credibility of America's alliance commitments comes up for question. And if a transmissible virus originates in China and spreads, it will quickly reach America's shores. The same dynamic is true in reverse. The United States and China are both highly exposed to each other.

Both countries also are prideful about their power and influence on the world stage. Neither country will accept a subordinate role to the other. Any attempt by either party to request a concession as a precondition for entering negotiations will invite frustration because it will not work. Chinese officials are fond of reminding that China is not Panama. Beijing will not capitulate under public pressure.

The purposes of direct negotiations are [fourfold \(https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ryan-L-Hass.pdf\)](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ryan-L-Hass.pdf) : (1) clarify top priorities and concerns about the other side's actions; (2) mitigate the risk of conflict; (3) capitalize on opportunities for coordination on shared challenges; (4) resolve areas of dispute that are ripe for solutions, even as there are few issues that presently would fit in this category.

Drawing lessons from the negotiating record of the past three administrations

Obama

During the latter years of the Obama administration, the United States and China maintained roughly 100 active channels for addressing a variety of functional and regional issues, from nuclear non-proliferation to disability rights. The breadth of dialogue mechanisms was an outgrowth of efforts dating back to the 1970s to explore bilateral cooperation as a means of cushioning the relationship from inescapable sources of rivalry and tension, such as over Taiwan or competing conceptions of the appropriate balance between individual rights and social order. As both countries became global actors with interests on every continent, the range of topics upon which both sides felt compelled to coordinate snowballed.

These efforts generated some productive results for American interests. For example, direct and intensive negotiations by then-Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson and later Tim Geithner led to coordinated U.S.-China actions to limit the duration and impact of the 2007-2009 global financial crisis. Joint coordination between the world's largest and third-largest economy (at the time) helped avert a global economic meltdown. On climate issues, President Barack Obama's direct outreach to Xi led to a Chinese pledge to cap emissions by 2030 and reach 20% renewables in China's energy mix. China is on track to hit this target. Active outreach by the White House to Beijing generated a joint U.S.-China response to the Ebola crisis in 2014. This joint response not only halted the spread of the deadly virus but also planted the seeds for the establishment of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. Obama's appeal to Xi to increase Chinese contributions to U.N. peacekeeping lessened the burden on the United States. Intensive outreach by American law enforcement leaders to their Chinese counterparts also generated expanded bilateral law enforcement cooperation, e.g., around transnational crime, child exploitation, and customs enforcement.

While some of the dialogues and negotiations yielded tangible outcomes that advanced American interests, many did not. Many senior-level government exchanges during this period were sterile presentations (<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ryan-L-Hass.pdf>) of long-standing talking points that did little to align efforts around meaningful coordination on shared challenges. As I have written about previously, the mismatch between effort and output in these diplomatic negotiations created fertile ground for critics of Obama's China policy to argue that China was playing the United States for a fool, i.e., stringing American officials on with endless dialogues and unenforceable pledges while Beijing grew more aggressive in challenging American interests and values. Other American leaders criticized the Obama administration for coddling dictators through endless engagements that bestowed respect upon China's leaders rather than holding them to account. Then-presidential candidate Trump also attacked Obama for being blind or indifferent to the hollowing out of America's manufacturing sector because of deepening American economic engagement with China.

Trump 1.0

The first Trump administration entered office determined to differentiate itself from the Obama administration. In its first months, the administration announced plans to sustain four cabinet-level dialogues on diplomatic, economic, law enforcement, and social issues. Trump grew impatient with this process, though, and narrowed the focus of the relationship to a negotiation over the U.S.-China trade imbalance. The

commencement of the U.S.-China trade war in 2018 concentrated minds in both capitals on bilateral negotiations to reach a mutually acceptable settlement. This led to the Phase-One trade agreement ⁷, which Trump signed at an elaborate White House ceremony in January 2020. Shortly thereafter, COVID-19 swept the world, cutting off contacts and spurring widespread shutdowns.

Even before the arrival of COVID-19, though, the Trump administration had unwound the architecture of dialogues and negotiation processes it had inherited. This decision was grounded in a few key judgements (<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ryan-L-Hass.pdf>) :

- China was too far removed from American values and interests to be swayed by traditional negotiations and diplomacy.
- Americans would no longer be taken for “suckers” by getting tapped along in negotiations leading nowhere.
- Engaging Chinese officials at senior levels conferred legitimacy upon the Chinese Communist Party that it did not deserve.
- Deep engagement and negotiations were not necessary since China’s strategic ambitions were already understood to conflict with America’s interests.

For these reasons and more, the Trump administration largely discarded bilateral negotiations and ongoing consultations outside of those relating to the Phase-One trade agreement. The Phase-One trade agreement also became overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic almost immediately after it was inked. When the consequences of the pandemic began leading to lockdowns across the world, there were virtually no official channels of communication between Washington and Beijing. Both countries engaged in a nationalist blame game (https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Rising-to-the-Challenge_Hass-Jones-and-Allen.pdf) instead of leading an international response. By the end of the Trump administration, there was effectively no regularized contact between U.S. and Chinese officials outside of routine exchanges through each country’s diplomatic missions in each other’s countries and sporadic military talks.

Biden

The Biden administration entered office determined to restore functionality to U.S.-China relations, but it was wary of being accused of repeating the pattern of endless

engagement that was associated with the Obama administration. Senior Biden administration officials resolved to shore up relations first with America's allies and partners before engaging directly with Chinese counterparts. The Biden team spent its first months fanning out across the globe to assure anxious partners that "America is back." They focused special attention on transatlantic relations as well as America's relations with key partners in the Indo-Pacific region. Following these efforts, the Biden administration invited China's top two foreign policy officials for an icebreaking meeting in Alaska with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. Rather than hosting a businesslike effort at moving the U.S.-China relationship forward, though, Blinken and Sullivan began the meeting with a performative stunt designed to show that they had learned their lessons from their involvement in the Obama administration and would be hard-nosed in dealing with China in their new roles. The gambit backfired, kicking off a public spectacle of accusations and counteraccusations by top U.S. and Chinese officials in front of international media. The scene of schoolchild-like bickering set back the Biden administration's efforts to present itself as representing a return to professionalism after the tumult of the Trump years.

Throughout his term, President Joe Biden engaged directly with Xi on multiple occasions through phone calls, letters, and face-to-face meetings on the margins of multilateral meetings. Biden and Xi regularly served as pressure release valves when tensions were rising. Both leaders seemed to appreciate that their own self-interests were ill-served by uncontrolled escalation in the bilateral relationship. Sullivan also developed a direct and discreet channel with his Chinese counterpart that both sides used to discuss the most sensitive issues in the bilateral relationship, such as Taiwan and cyber issues. Sullivan and his counterpart, first Yang Jiechi and later Wang Yi, developed a pattern of meeting regularly in third countries for quiet consultations to defuse crises, limit miscalculations about strategic intent, and lay the groundwork for leader-level exchanges. Sullivan's intensive efforts were largely organized around strategic communication to shrink space for miscalculation, and not around negotiating deliverables for public announcement.

The Biden administration's active diplomacy generated progress in several areas. It led to a revival of efforts at risk reduction, including via reciprocal pre-notifications of ballistic missile launches. Tensions in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea remained within manageable bounds. Biden and Xi reached a public agreement that humans must maintain control of all nuclear launch decisions and that such decisions must never be delegated to artificial intelligence. There also was progress in strengthening law enforcement cooperation. Specifically, China accepted repatriation

flights for illegal immigrants facing deportation from the United States. At Biden's request, Beijing also scheduled 55 synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals, coordinated on arrests of Chinese citizens, and increased information-sharing in support of bilateral counternarcotics cooperation. This led to a disruption (<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/trump-fentanyl-felbab-brown-final.pdf>) in the supply of fentanyl precursor chemicals from China to Mexican cartels. During the final year of the Biden administration, drug overdose deaths in the United States dropped nearly 24%, marking the first drop in drug fatality numbers since 2018. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ⁷ attributes this drop to a range of factors, such as widespread distribution of the life-saving medication naloxone, and not just reduced supply from China.

Supporters of Biden's policy approach to China argue that Biden succeeded in securing China's acceptance of the need to maintain continuous communication even amidst intensifying rivalry. They note that Biden took competitive steps such as strengthening alliances, showing more support for Taiwan, and tightening global export controls on China without sacrificing the administration's capacity for direct diplomacy with China. Critics of Biden's approach contend that they were too solicitous of Beijing and did not have much to show for such efforts. They argue that Beijing still is too lax in controlling fentanyl precursor flows, as demonstrated by the 87,000 ⁷ drug overdose fatalities that occurred in 2024. They also assert the Biden administration's emphasis on engagement slowed down progress toward resetting the U.S.-China relationship in a more competitive posture.

What have negotiations achieved?

A fair-minded review of this record would conclude that efforts to negotiate with China over the past three administrations have generated progress when certain conditions have been met. Key ingredients of progress in U.S.-China negotiations have included leader-level buy-in for negotiations, mutual awareness of the specific and concrete objectives of each side, clearly identifiable mutual benefits from negotiated agreements, and well-structured negotiation processes led by officials who are empowered by their leaders to advance talks. Most, if not all, of these attributes have been present in instances when negotiations delivered progress on American priorities across the Obama, Trump '45, and Biden administrations. In some instances, such as China's 2019 decision to strengthen bilateral counternarcotics cooperation, Beijing took steps to respond to U.S. concerns in a bid to secure relief from American

pressure in other areas of the relationship. Even as neither side ever got 100% of what it wished, American prosperity was protected through unprecedented U.S.-China economic coordination to lessen the impacts of the global financial crisis. American lives were saved through coordination to halt the spread of Ebola. And the risk of a major power war was lowered through coordinated risk reduction, for example around limits on the uses of artificial weapons in nuclear launches.

At the same time, critics of U.S.-China negotiations could fairly argue that there has been far more effort than output. Periods of American enthusiasm for negotiating with China have unnerved U.S. allies. China's record of follow-through on commitments has either been uneven or unacceptable, depending upon one's point of view.

There presently is an [open debate \(https://www.brookings.edu/articles/should-the-us-pursue-a-new-cold-war-with-china/\)](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/should-the-us-pursue-a-new-cold-war-with-china/) in Washington over whether the relationship already has tipped into a cold war, or even whether such an outcome is inevitable. If the relationship resembles a cold war, critics of negotiations contend, then there would be diminished value in negotiating with China, since the nature of the relationship already would be fixed and neither side would willingly take actions that could benefit the other. Others who are concerned about the U.S.-China relationship moving toward a cold war have argued that the stakes of such confrontation make active U.S.-China diplomacy even more essential for managing stresses through arms control, crisis communication, and the like. Sensing this shifting cold war zeitgeist, the late Jeffrey Bader urged American analysts in 2020 not to sugarcoat the costs and risks of a [new U.S.-China cold war \(https://www.brookings.edu/articles/avoiding-a-new-cold-war-between-the-us-and-china/\)](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/avoiding-a-new-cold-war-between-the-us-and-china/) :

"A U.S.-China cold war would not be like the U.S.-Soviet one, which was largely military and ideological. A cold war would begin with radical decoupling and disengagement, which regrettably we are already seeing. It would descend and expand from there. It would fracture the international community on issues on which there should otherwise be widespread cooperation. It would build walls between economies, scientists, scholars, and ordinary people. It would likely foment ethnic stereotyping, discrimination, and hatred. It would prevent two great civilizations from benefitting from each other's strengths and contributions. It would exacerbate an arms race that would crowd out domestic priorities. Above all, it would increase the risk of military conflict, even if neither side desires it."

While U.S. [public disapproval](#) of China's behavior is high, there does not appear to be broad public enthusiasm for bearing the costs of a cold war along the lines of what Bader warns. Americans' [top priority](#) on China is to avoid war. The American public is clear in its desire to manage competition with China without escalating into open conflict.

Trump appears to have a keen feel for Americans' sentiments on China. Trump regularly projects confidence in his capacity to manage problems and reach deals with Xi. He never has called for regime change in China. Compared to his rhetorical spontaneity on most other issues, Trump has been remarkably consistent in stressing that he will manage U.S.-China relations without resorting to conflict. He has steadfastly resisted signaling how he would respond to a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. While there are some among Trump's supporters and close advisors who believe it is acceptable or inevitable for the United States and China to cleave apart into distinct spheres or blocs, Trump has not lent his voice to such ambitions.

Unlike virtually all other national leaders, Trump does not seem to fear being attacked as weak on China. This may be because he does not size up any national-level politician as being capable of credibly breaking through in persuading the American public that Trump's approach to China is too soft.


Rather, Trump presents himself as being in a category of one on the national stage for his determination to hold China to account for its unfair trade practices. Trump has shown higher tolerance for friction with China in addressing trade imbalances than any recent president. He has not, however, called for full-scale U.S.-China economic decoupling, and the loss of nearly [\\$190 billion](#) in U.S. exports to China and the 862,000 American jobs that would result from it.

Applying a negotiation framework for the present

There are major obstacles to advancing U.S.-China negotiations in the current moment. Lack of trust is not one of them. U.S. and Chinese leaders have not trusted each other at any point in the modern era of bilateral relations. When progress has been achieved through negotiations, leaders in both countries have been able to gain confidence in their understanding of the other side's objectives and constraints. That element is missing now.

Chinese leaders lack confidence in their understanding of the objectives animating Trump's tariffs-first approach to negotiations. Part of this is due to the Trump administration's inconsistent messaging on the purpose of its global tariff gambit. At times, tariffs are explained as a means of generating leverage and compelling counterparties to come to the negotiating table. At other times, they are described in the context of reindustrializing America. At others, they are framed as a source of revenue generation. In the absence of clarity on what Trump is seeking to achieve, Chinese leaders likely will default to assuming that the tariffs are part of a strategy to degrade China's economic competitiveness and derail China's national ascent.

“If a leader-level communication is to occur, it almost certainly will need to be initiated by Trump. Xi will not be the first to propose direct contact.”



Given the centrality of Trump and Xi in their respective political systems, nothing short of leader-level communication will do to clarify the goals of America's efforts to address U.S.-China trade imbalances. If a leader-level communication is to occur, it almost certainly will need to be initiated by Trump. Xi will not be the first to propose direct contact.

When the two leaders communicate, Trump could clarify to Xi that he aspires to regenerate American power, regain control of America's sovereign borders, and rebuild a sense of national purpose. He judges that America has been engulfed by a sense of malaise—hobbled by war, hollowed out by deindustrialization, stricken by declining life expectancy, burdened by mounting national debt, and paralyzed by partisan gridlock. Trump could say that he aims to shake America out of its national funk. As part of such efforts, he believes it will be necessary to establish a more equitable U.S.-China trade relationship.

To break through with Xi, Trump will need to acknowledge that the United States and China are both major powers. Neither country can dictate terms to the other. Both countries will be harmed by maintaining high tariffs on each other's products, but not to the point of existential threat that would compel one side to capitulate to the other. Neither country is so dependent on exports to the other that their economic or governance model would be imperiled without it.

Beijing craves respect. Chinese leaders will only agree to a deal that they can pitch at home and abroad as a win for themselves, too. Chinese leaders would not agree to a redux of the Phase One trade agreement in 2025 because they judged that agreement was one-sided in favor of the United States. The narrowing gap in national power between both countries, in their estimation, means that China no longer needs to accept lopsided agreements. The present challenge is to identify where interests overlap, thereby enabling both Washington and Beijing to claim a win through negotiations.

Trade and economics

America needs to produce more and consume less. China is the inverse. Increased domestic demand in China would boost China's growth while reducing the need to dump exports into U.S. and global markets. Reciprocal expansion in market access also could lead to more balanced U.S.-China trade over time.

China has nominally signaled support for boosting domestic consumption but has not shown meaningful follow-through. Trump could press Xi to offer time-bound plans for boosting domestic consumption and expanding market access for U.S. products. Trump could signal a willingness to reciprocate in expanding market access in non-national security sensitive sectors.

Both countries also would benefit from negotiations that result in Chinese investment into the American heartland, particularly to support manufacturing capacity in non-national security sectors. Chinese investments there would bolster Trump's reindustrialization plans, while Xi could point to homegrown firms entering the U.S. market and profiting from it. Trump already has voiced [public support](#) for China investing more in the United States.

Risk reduction/military-military relations

Trump and Xi also could prioritize risk reduction in the overall relationship. Neither wants to bet their presidency on defeating the other in conflict. To be sure, both leaders have invested significantly in their militaries and have built political brands around strength and toughness. Additionally, Xi is a revisionist leader who aspires to shift international borders to reflect Chinese claims.

The risk of a U.S.-China military conflict is real. Sustained bilateral efforts to mitigate risks presently are absent. Much as U.S. and Soviet leaders built a robust arms control and crisis communications agenda during the Cold War, there is an opportunity now for U.S. and Chinese leaders to concentrate efforts around managing risks from new and emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, cyberweapons, space-based capabilities, and bioweapons. Both countries have a shared interest, for example, in preventing out-of-control scenarios for large artificial intelligence models. They both are vulnerable to cyberattacks and would benefit from demarcations around boundaries of acceptable uses of cyber in conflict. Similarly, both countries share an incentive to limit orbital debris and could benefit from reaching an understanding on mutual restraint in testing military capabilities in space. While Trump and his immediate advisors have limited technical expertise in these fields, the U.S. government retains specialized capacity that could be called upon to work at Trump's direction to explore prospects for progress.

China is also presently conducting a dramatic [build-up](#) in its nuclear capabilities. While it is unlikely that Beijing will enter arms control negotiations until it moves closer to parity with the United States, there are still profitable areas for dialogue. Trump could press Xi to clarify what China's aims are for its nuclear posture vis-à-vis the United States. He could urge Beijing to demonstrate greater transparency around the purpose and goals of its nuclear buildout. Trump could press for the establishment of a direct link between the [U.S. National and Nuclear Risk Reduction Center](#) and its Chinese counterpart, and urge that Beijing commit to sustain this channel and not treat it like a light switch it turns on and off based on its mood toward the United States. He also could call for both countries to commit to a regularized bilateral prelaunch missile notification regime for missiles that extend beyond a mutually agreed range.

Up to now, Beijing has been unwilling to engage substantively with Washington on nuclear issues. Trump's announcement of plans to develop a [Golden Dome](#) missile defense system introduces a new variable that could increase the incentive for Beijing to adjust its posture. The Trump administration will need to be prepared to explain its assessment of the implications of the Golden Dome system for bilateral strategic stability if it wishes to elicit Chinese engagement on nuclear issues more broadly.

Trump may be tempted to include Taiwan in security discussions, either as a source of leverage or as trade bait to gain concessions from Beijing on other issues. He should resist such temptations. Any attempt to link America's support for Taiwan with broader negotiations over other issues would represent a historic miscalculation. First, any linkage of America's support for Taiwan with negotiations on other issues could violate

the "[Six Assurances 7](#)," a set of commitments President Ronald Reagan made to Taiwan in 1982. Second, Beijing has shown zero interest in trading anything for acceptance of its position on Taiwan. Beijing views its claim over Taiwan as principled and just and does not believe it is up for negotiation. Third, any attempt by Trump to trade America's long-standing position on Taiwan for Chinese concessions in other areas would quickly leak. This would send a signal to every other American ally that Trump's security commitments are for sale. In short, if Trump ever attempted to trade America's position on Taiwan for Chinese concessions elsewhere, he would be seen as a chump—a leader who undermined America's security position and got nothing for it in return.

Law enforcement

Trump could explain that Chinese firms' exports of [fentanyl precursors](#) (<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-fentanyl-crisis-from-naloxone-to-tariffs/>) that are entering the United States via Mexico directly implicate his objective of restoring control of America's borders. He could request Xi's personal involvement in tightening Chinese laws and regulations to disincentivize and criminalize the export of fentanyl precursors and in overseeing their fulsome implementation. Trump could request Xi's support for expanding U.S.-China law enforcement cooperation in both directions to address shared concerns, including China's request for U.S. law enforcement cooperation in countering online fraud and scams targeting Chinese citizens. Trump could note his willingness to roll back fentanyl-related tariffs when pre-negotiated benchmarks of progress are met. Trump has moved tariff rates up and down on a frequent basis. He could adjust these tariffs as well if he secures progress toward his goal of getting China to clamp down on the export of fentanyl precursors.

A process for making progress


Even though many of Trump's priorities would be advanced by U.S.-China coordination, there will be many in Washington who will nevertheless argue that it would be futile for Washington to seek Beijing's cooperation on them. These skeptics will argue that negotiating with Beijing will generate more harm than benefit. According to their logic, Beijing likely will tap Trump along, i.e., hold out the prospect of big deals on Trump's priorities and warn that tough American actions against China could imperil such outcomes. Even if Beijing does agree to cooperate on Trump's priorities, these critics will assert, Beijing likely will overpromise and underdeliver. Beijing also will seek to wrap bilateral negotiations in pomp and circumstance to get the reputational benefit

of being accorded deference from the American side but without offering substantive flexibility on Trump's priorities in return.

Such cynicism is deeply engrained and widely held in Washington. Trump has never been known to defer to the consensus of the foreign policy elite, though, and this issue is not likely to prove the exception. Trump seems to instinctively understand that his self-identity as a dealmaker is an important element of his political brand, and that nothing would burnish his image as a dealmaker more than delivering in the most consequential relationship on the world stage. Trump also seems to appreciate that there is no public enthusiasm in the United States for a costly or violent struggle with China. Trump's dearth of progress in enlisting allies to push back on China's unfair trade practices also offers a fresh reminder of the absence of enthusiasm among virtually any of America's allies for seeking to contain China in a classical Cold War sense.

For better or worse, Trump seems committed to attempting to negotiate deals with China. Given the Leninist, top-down structure of the Chinese political system, it is very difficult to advance progress on American priorities without a signal from Xi that he supports doing so. At the same time, Xi will not negotiate directly with Trump around any of these issues until bilateral talks have ripened to a point where the contours of a deal are in place. This creates a bit of a catch-22.

“Chinese leaders assume that any message that Trump or others send publicly is largely for Trump's domestic political performative purposes, and not as a serious attempt to move bilateral negotiations.”



The best available workaround for Trump is to engage Xi to seek agreement on a negotiating agenda and a timeframe for when Trump and Xi would meet to review progress and finalize deals where possible. This initial outreach from Trump to Xi to coordinate the negotiating agenda for the bilateral relationship could be accomplished through a variety of means, i.e., a personal letter, a phone call, an oral message that could be conveyed by one of Trump's trusted confidants to Xi, and/or a message passed through a third party such as another world leader who maintains close relations with both sides. The only requirement for ensuring the message is received and taken seriously by the Chinese side is that the message be transmitted privately

and discreetly. Chinese leaders will discount any demand that is delivered publicly. They assume that American leaders intuitively understand that Chinese leaders have their own political requirements, one of which is preventing any perception that they are being dictated to by their American counterparts. Therefore, Chinese leaders assume that any message that Trump or others send publicly is largely for Trump's domestic political performative purposes, and not as a serious attempt to move bilateral negotiations.

As part of his private message to Xi, Trump should request Xi's response to his proposed areas for negotiation. He should identify who he has designated on his team to lead negotiations on each of the issues he has prioritized and request that Xi reciprocate. Trump also should identify when he expects to see Xi next, for example, at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leader's meeting in November in South Korea. Trump could signal his expectation to use his next meeting with Xi to review negotiating progress and announce deals that could be finalized between both leaders. Trump also would need to be open to the prospect that Xi could request to add items to the bilateral agenda of negotiation. Otherwise, Xi may reject the entire premise of the proposed way forward.

If Trump follows this roadmap, or something approximating it, he will succeed in focusing the relationship on the issues that matter most for his vision of advancing American interests. This plan would not resemble the intense dialogue that characterized the Obama administration nor the cold turkey approach of nearly no dialogue toward the end of Trump's first administration. It would eschew pageantry or public point-scoring in favor of a focused set of negotiations on a few priority issues that both leaders have identified and for which they have empowered their advisors to address.

This proposed approach may seem unsatisfying for Trump. First, this approach will not generate a grand bargain that favors America and disadvantages China. The balance of power between both powers is now such that no one-sided deals are attainable for either side. Second, this laddered approach to negotiations will preclude Trump from negotiating directly with Xi in a manner akin to Trump's direct engagement with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the Ukraine conflict. U.S.-China leader-leader negotiations without prior staff preparation simply are not an available option for Trump. Xi does not seem to believe he owes Trump anything or that he and Trump have a personal relationship with each other that would compel Xi to accommodate Trump's demands. For Xi, it's just business. His business is to uphold China's dignity

and respect on the world stage, protect China's governance system, and preserve the country's development path.

Conclusion

So long as the United States and China remain exposed to each other, they will impact the other for good or ill. Not out of amity or goodwill, but rather in clear-eyed pursuit of national interest, representatives of both countries will need to develop and sustain the capacity to manage and resolve problems. China's national identity prevents it from accepting a subordinate role to the United States, and the same is true in reverse. Both countries' politics demand that their leaders stand firm in the face of foreign pressure. And neither country holds sufficient leverage over the other to compel it to accept an unfavorable agreement.

The common attribute of every difficult issue that has been managed or resolved in the U.S.-China relationship over the past 45 years has been high-functioning relationships between key officials. This allows negotiators on both sides to understand the incentives and constraints that their counterparts are operating within. Negotiators need to be empowered by their leaders to explore the realm of the possible. They also need to be given clear instructions on the objectives of their mission.

The U.S.-China relationship presently is separated by a high tariff wall, but a small door remains available to break out of the current impasse. The momentum of the relationship presently is moving away from any type of focused negotiation leading to agreements that would lend stability to the relationship. A shrewd bettor would not put money down on any near-term stabilization of U.S.-China relations.

Even so, Trump and Xi can still escape the mutual harm of the current impasse by agreeing upon a focused set of issues and a negotiating plan for moving the relationship forward. This door will not remain open forever, though. If Trump and Xi miss the moment, the relationship between the world's two most powerful countries likely will drift toward deeper estrangement and enmity. Such an outcome would be a choice, not an inevitability. It also would be a lose-lose for both leaders.

AUTHOR



Ryan Hass Director - John L. Thornton China Center, Senior Fellow - Foreign Policy, Center for Asia Policy Studies, John L. Thornton China Center, Chen-Fu and Cecilia Yen Koo Chair in Taiwan Studies
X @ryanl_hass

Acknowledgements and disclosures

The author wishes to thank Adam Lammon for editing, Rachel Slattery for layout, and the anonymous peer reviewers for their feedback.

The Brookings Institution is committed to quality, independence, and impact.

We are supported by a [diverse array of funders \(/about-us/annual-report/\)](/about-us/annual-report/). In line with our [values and policies \(/about-us/research-independence-and-integrity-policies/\)](/about-us/research-independence-and-integrity-policies/), each Brookings publication represents the sole views of its author(s).

Copyright 2025 The Brookings Institution